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AUTHOR	Forte-Turner, Alexandria; Schultz, Lynn; Miller-Dunleavy, Linda
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ABSTRACT

The Military Career Transition Program (MCTP) at Old Dominion University (Virginia) is the primary alternative certification program for teacher licensure targeting military personnel who are transitioning into education careers. Beginning in the fall of 1998, the MCTP added distance learning to its existing course offerings at 5 of its 15 sites. These courses follow a hybrid instructional model that includes VTEL and World Wide Web assisted instruction. Broadcast instructors and instructional facilitators at each distance learning site are utilized to facilitate collaborative, problem-based learning. This paper describes the evolution of the MCTP distance learning effort and examines the progression of strategic decision making involving the issues of course integrity, exemplary instructional methodology, and student accountability. (Author/MES)

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Creating Hybrid Instruction: A Lens for Defining Exemplary Teaching in Distance Learning

Alexandria Forte-Turner
Military Career Transition Program, Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA. E-mail: aforte@odu.edu

Lynn Schultz
Educational Curriculum and Instruction, Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA. E-mail: llschult@odu.edu

Linda Miller-Dunleavy
Early Childhood/Speech and Language Pathology/Special Education, Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA. E-mail: lmillerd@odu.edu

Abstract: The Military Career Transition Program (MCTP) at Old Dominion University is the primary alternative certification program for teacher licensure targeting military personnel who are transitioning into education careers. Beginning Fall 1998, the MCTP added distance learning to its existing course offerings at five of its fifteen sites. These courses follow a hybrid instructional model, which include VTEL and web assisted instruction. Broadcast instructors and instructional facilitators at each distance learning site are utilized to facilitate collaborative, problem-based learning. This paper describes the evolution of the MCTP distance learning effort and examines the progression of strategic decision making involving the issues of course integrity, exemplary instructional methodology, and student accountability.

Introduction

In designing distance learning instruction the "garbage in, garbage out" tenet holds true as it does in any other kind of instruction. Quality distance learning depends upon: 1) sound curricular design, 2) exemplary instruction and 3) proper support, whether defined as technology resources or finances. These three variables do not carry equal weight in distance education; no amount of money or technology compensates for a lack of instructional skill or attention to curricular design. We maintain, based upon our experiences, that a hybrid instructional model which combines synchronous, asynchronous, and web based instruction supported by a team approach to goal setting and curricular design maximizes exemplary distance instruction, and therefore distance learning. This paper describes the curricular design process involved in broadcasting the core courses of the Military Career Transition Program (MCTP) at Old Dominion University. The development process detailed herein chronicles an ongoing effort that began in October 1998 involving three phases: creation of the instructional model and course technical support, instruction and broadcast delivery, and course and production refinement. The first six core pedogogical courses have been broadcast during Spring and Summer of 1999. Six additional courses, four instructional methodology courses and two educational electives, are slated for broadcast in Fall 1999 and Spring 2000, completing the MCTP degree program.

Background

Since its inception in 1988, Old Dominion University's MCTP has been extraordinarily successful in preparing and placing its graduate teacher candidates. More than 1200 graduates are teaching in 47 states, over 1400 students are currently in the program, and about 150 new teachers are graduating and being certified each year. The MCTP now offers one baccalaureate program, three master's programs, and a collaborative Certificate of

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Advanced Study with the Educational Leadership and Counseling and Educational Curriculum and Instructional departments. Teacher licensure is offered at all grade levels, with additional endorsements available in Special Education and Technology Education. The MCTP offers standard semester courses as well as a compressed curriculum designed to meet the needs of deploying active duty military personnel.

In 1998 it became apparent that the MTCP alternative certification program possessed great marketability, both within the existing MCTP sites and through the established Old Dominion University distance education delivery system (TELETECHNET). No alternative paths to teaching licensure existed through distance learning prior to MCTP broadcast courses; traditional licensure methods almost always excluded active duty military personnel due to residency requirements. The MCTP distance education program broadcasted its first courses in January 1999 to a waiting constituency of students at five sites in Virginia, the District of Columbia, and the state of Washington.

Developing the Hybrid Model of Instruction

The current model for distance learning generally involves simply broadcasting existing live courses with little or no thought to reinventing instruction or selecting faculty best suited to broadcast. The major difficulty with this model is that it effectively ignores every available piece of reliable research on effective teaching (Hunter 1982, Joyce & Weil 1986, Fisher & Berliner 1985) which speaks to the delicate balance between sound planning and execution of instructional strategy. To say that it suffices to take mundane pedagogy that few people see and broadcast it for the multitudes negates our commitment to distance learning students; in effect we are saying that students pay for convenience with acceptance of mediocrity. Even with the more masterfully taught courses, there tends to be a lack of reinvention of instruction or curricular redesign— existing syllabi, course requirements, and instructor notes are simply posted to a course web site. Delivery of instruction is generally relegated to the "talking head" or "talking head in a box" superimposed over transparencies or electronic presentations. Current distance learning faculty tend to see themselves as presenters of material rather than facilitators of learning.

Confronted with these issues, we began the design of the Exemplary Teaching for Distance Learning (ETDL) Model. During the previous year, the MCTP elected to commence a comprehensive examination of existing curricula and redesign course competencies and requirements independent of any distance learning concerns. In order to accomplish this, teams of faculty members gathered in curricular groups to assess course outcomes, discuss strategies, and essentially "slash and burn" the curriculum with an eye toward what truly makes our students successful in the educational workforce. The resulting curriculum is a competency based course guide that ensures quality of instruction and consistency among the fifteen sites at which the MCTP is offered. Once the concept of offering the MCTP through distance learning was fully explored, a commitment was made to proceed with the new delivery methodology using the revised curriculum. A selected "team of experts" began program goal setting and logistic decision-making. It is this step which concretely began the MCTP distance learning effort and the construction of the ETDL Model.

An examination of the MCTP distance learning team is essential to understanding the importance of curricular redesign as a contributing factor to quality distance learning. The team consisted of College of Education instructional technology faculty, a curriculum design specialist, staff from the University Center for Learning Technologies and Academic Television Services, and potential broadcast faculty who were teaching MCTP courses. The advantages this approach gave included the ability of each team member to bring to the effort their own unique area of expertise, ensuring that exemplary input would yield an exemplary product. This team made decisions that included broadcast dates, times, locations, and program sequence. It became apparent that the curricular revisions of the previous year would not adequately ensure quality distance teaching. What followed was a process that can only be described as curricular reinvention. Courses taught over the normal 14 week semester had to be condensed into blended synchronous/asynchronous/web-based instruction with 50% less direct contact between broadcast instructor and student. In addition, course competencies had to be translated into web-based activities that would ensure student learning and provide critical assessment information for the instructors. Each instructor submitted a conceptual framework of requirements that they felt would lead to mastery of course competencies. The curriculum design specialist converted the original course competencies into problem-based learning and collaborative action projects that would increase student accountability. The instructional technologist then made logistical decisions regarding which activities were conducive to web based instruction. Based on those decisions, the course web site was developed. The breadth of experience represented on the design team played an important role in the development of blended courses that retain the integrity of the original course goals.

Course Reinvention

The MCTP reinvented rather than redesigned its core courses to better meet the needs of distance education students. Most distance education courses were previously taught with a traditional, teacher-directed approach. Students expressed dissatisfaction with this method of instructional delivery and disillusionment with their inability to customize course content and requirements according to their needs. Based upon these observations, the MCTP team decided that distance education courses should place the responsibility of problem solving and discovery upon the individual who desires the learning, thus allowing for greater customization of coursework. This concept alone created the need and the basis for the complete reinvention of curriculum, and more importantly the retraining of faculty who would need to take the leap of faith necessary in transferring accountability to students. Courses were designed with opportunities for students to customize content issues through threaded discussions on the web site and collaborative projects. Rather than creating increased student accountability by assigning more work, faculty were encouraged to adopt a problem based learning approach which would create motivation among students to acquire competencies. For example, in the core lesson planning course, MCTP students were required to work with classroom teachers in a school of their choice to design and teach problem-based learning units for pupils in grades K - 12. In the educational foundation course, teams of MCTP students attended and presented potential solutions to current problems with block scheduling, alternative schools, and national standards at school board and school faculty meetings. MCTP special education students developed an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and case studies for the purpose of providing classroom remediation and intervention strategies.

Design Chronology

Three basic areas of learning were identified: broadcast instruction, web assisted instruction, and individual student-centered research. The initial decisions made by instructional faculty concerned the placement of course competencies in one of these three categories for course design. Concepts which needed to be communicated via "talking head" or which contained large amounts of overt information were relegated to the broadcast instruction category. This allowed faculty to retain control over the amount of content, depth of content, and the pacing of instruction during each broadcast session. Retaining a small portion of lecture format helped alleviate faculty fears that they would not be able to cover an appropriate amount of material in the reduced teacher-student contact time. Web assisted instruction consisted of a course website designed to clarify requirements, chronologically organize content and assignments, stimulate threaded discussions on controversial course topics, and provide space for on-line collaborative work across sites. Web assisted instruction was reserved primarily for application of course concepts taught via "talking head" and demonstration of contextual transfer of knowledge beyond the examples provided by the instructor. Student-centered research opportunities (collaborative projects, field research, and article analysis) were designed with the goal of creating motivation to delve deeper into content, customize the learning to meet individual need, and bring reality into the classroom discussions.

The bulk of course design then centered on the categorization of course concepts into three categories: those that would be introduced, those that would be taught, and those for which mastery would be expected. This filtering process was necessitated by the reduction of teacher-student contact time, previously mentioned. Modeling the tenets of effective teaching, faculty made critical but difficult decisions regarding depth and sometimes omission of content. In order to facilitate this process, a matrix was developed for each course, in which competencies were listed and catalogued by all MCTP faculty who taught core courses in any venue. Faculty were required to re-evaluate the critical attributes of their courses and determine what was relevant and what was related but less critical information. We were unprepared for how excruciating this consensus process would become. The tendency of instructional faculty to become proprietary regarding course content nearly overshadowed the concrete production parameters, i.e. time slots, equipment compatibility, taping capability, and presentation of visual aids. Ultimately, course visitations were made by a curricular committee to observe for each course, across sites, how the presentation of concepts differed. Consistency was critical because all MCTP students would be administered general comprehensive examinations at the end of their program. Where consensus seemed impossible regarding emphasis, final decisions were made by broadcast faculty in conjunction with the curricular specialist, and the official course syllabi were altered accordingly. These decisions were necessary, but rarely popular.

After concept categorization, faculty decisions were made regarding student accountability for each of the competencies. Prior distance learning experiences indicated that geographic distance contributed to a difficulty in assigning student accountability. The anonymity distance education students have tends to make them more passive and therefore less likely to invest in initiating and developing course goals and objectives. Additionally, distance

education faculty indicated a reticence among students to be fully accountable for their learning. Generally, their solution to this has been to utilize traditional forms of summative evaluation more frequently than in their traditional classrooms. Prior research among TELETECHNET courses indicated that anonymity potentially reduces motivation among students in initiating and completing course tasks. Because the MCTP broadcast classes were two-way video as well as audio, students felt more connected and less anonymous but this issue remained a concern. Solutions to this problem were generated through alternative assessment.

Alternative Assessment

Alternative forms of assessment were perhaps the most difficult manifestation of student accountability. Both faculty and students seemed instinctively drawn to traditional course requirements (i.e. papers, tests, presentations), despite the fact that these methods of assessment did not accurately test mastery of the higher cognitive level course objectives. The move toward more alternative forms of assessing student learning (i.e. teaching vignettes, threaded discussions, inter- and intra-site collaborative projects, problem-based learning activities) provided better assessment information and offered students the opportunity to customize learning. In the specific examples noted above, students teaching problem-based learning units videotaped classroom instruction. These tapes, along with additional demonstration lessons in class, were analyzed and critiqued by peer coaching teams. The course competencies regarding effective teaching research (Bloom et al. 1981) were used as guidelines for assessment. The efficacy of solutions developed by the Educational Foundations class was critiqued by area school personnel as well as instructors and classmates with regard to realistic use of resources and the potential for positive impact on the school. More traditional forms of assessment were applied toward basic knowledge/comprehension level concepts taught during broadcasting. The special education class combined both traditional and alternative forms of assessment by requiring written Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and detailed analysis of vignettes, as well as the nontraditional, more thought provoking threaded discussions posted to the course web site, encouraging student development of philosophy regarding controversial special education issues.

In all cases, the intent of curricular assessment redesign was to promote not only critical but creative thinking of students related to course competencies. Ultimately faculty decided that outcome based assessment required mastery of both course competencies and a higher level of metacognition with the material presented. The critical question in course planning became "What do I want my students to do ten years from now?" This lens assisted instructors in defining both critical attributes of the course and survival skills embedded within the content. It should be noted that all broadcast courses both required and valued student self-evaluations; commitment to formative as well as summative assessment was an important paradigm shift.

Conclusions

The resulting course quality has been equal to or better than the original traditionally taught courses, as evidenced by student demonstration of course competencies, student evaluation of instruction, and subsequent student performance in advanced courses. Any negative feedback from students concerning the distance learning courses has centered on access to the technology and the resulting steep learning curve required to use the related web sites. Although the students in this distance learning program are experienced using technology, there has remained a wide range of ability levels that affects their early success with course requirements. Aside from the technology factor, all broadcast instructors have compensated for the geographic distance through creativity in instruction and assessment. This creativity is evident in previously cited examples of: 1) problem-based learning projects which allowed students to impact local educational concerns, 2) collaborative grouping students across distance learning sites, 3) students' involvement in community research on the trends and issues affecting educators, 4) partnerships with school districts providing clinical experience, 5) peer observation and feedback of practice teaching sessions across sites, and 6) student-to-student evaluation of online coursework in workshop formats.

As a result of our distance education experiences, we would like to propose the following points for consideration when creating or improving a distance learning program:

1. The distance learning planning process should begin with a carefully selected team representing educational technology, curriculum development, teaching faculty, and broadcast production technicians. Team dynamics definitely correlate to broadcast course quality. The "team of experts" approach insures that the quality of input is exemplary, requiring no individual to venture outside their area of expertise in designing or producing the final

product.

2. The foray into distance education at the program level requires a significant institutional commitment, both financial and conceptual. Garnering support at the institutional or departmental level is a critical step that must occur before course design commences. Otherwise, unexpected expenditures of time and money will assuredly derail the project. For example, one week before broadcasting our fourth course the MCTP discovered that the anticipated free military network time was unavailable, requiring broadcast time to be purchased. Many such unexpected support problems arose; our distance learning effort used significantly more of time and money than was originally anticipated. We could have made concessions along the way but opted instead to place quality and longevity of course offerings as the priorities.

3. Selection of distance education faculty for broadcast should center on the criteria associated with effective teaching research (Berliner, 1996), not by the usual mechanisms which often involve seniority, tenure or workload. Unfortunately, we found a high degree of mediocre instruction among the faculty who were teaching TELETECHNET courses for the University. The MCTP faculty (mostly adjuncts who are practitioners in public schools) presented a much better quality pool of teaching and presentation skills for broadcast instruction. However, they required a significant amount of technological training in order to operate the broadcast equipment. During the first airing of MCTP classes, our much anticipated new technology and broadcast facility was not complete; the first four VTEL classes were broadcast out of one of the University's off-campus graduate centers in a makeshift virtual classroom. Instructors were required to operate all of the equipment without the aid of technicians. Despite this, instructional quality was good, although tape quality suffered due to human error and much editing was needed.

4. Specific synchronous and asynchronous components of distance learning should be analyzed for the purpose of supporting the idea that all quality distance instruction need not fall like pearls of wisdom from the mouths of broadcast instructors. Course web sites, along with their associated URL's, should be reviewed for clarity and support of course goals, objectives, and requirements. Discussion databases (threads) should stimulate meaningful student participation. Non-traditional, authentic assessment using web based resources should be a topic of considerable faculty research. Course instructors must be pushed toward valuing both formative and summative kinds of evaluation in order to support increased student accountability.

5. Issues concerning student support, while not fully explored here, are as essential to the design process as are the course competencies and assessments.

6. Most importantly, courses previously taught in traditional classroom settings cannot simply be "converted" into broadcast instruction; reductions in contact time and the addition of geographic distance require creativity in instructional and evaluative design. It is critical that students show application and mastery in ways that mirror reality. To accomplish this, students must actively take charge of course objectives that present opportunities to interact with the community, practitioners in the field, and the populations they will ultimately serve.

Summary

Distance education presents unique opportunities for faculty, staff and students to impact the learning environment and individualize learning. This process challenges the instructional paradigms that have become familiar and comfortable to most faculty; it also rests the burden for learning squarely on the shoulders of the distance education student. Instructional mediocrity is not an acceptable exchange for locational convenience. Heretical though it may seem to the ivory tower, only those faculty who are capable of the exemplary instructional technique of the master teacher should be allowed to present to the multitudes. Committing to high quality distance education means that we select the individuals with the most potential for improvement in the broadcast arena for intensive training. Additionally, evaluation methods for faculty should undergo close scrutiny and revision in order to emphasize effective teaching skills. Resources must be available to cover both anticipated and unanticipated instructional and production concerns. Distance learning opportunities have literally changed the face of education and opened educational doors to untapped student markets. Distance education programs that satisfy critical student needs have become the cash cows of colleges and universities world-wide, encouraging new for-profit players in the distance education market. The lure of organizational financial gain makes it tempting to quickly and haphazardly broadcast or post existing courses to the web without regard to effective technique. The conversion of courses from traditional to blended distance instruction requires monumental institutional, faculty and student commitment in order to maximize learning, retention and transfer.

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